

MEETING: 8 SEPTEMBER 2022

REPORT BY: SECRETARY TO THE COMMISSION

SECRETARY'S UPDATE REPORT

Purpose

1. The purpose of this report is to provide an update to the Commission on significant recent activity relating to local government.
2. The Commission receives regular information to complement this report, which is available through the [members' SharePoint site](#). This includes:
 - The Interim Controller of Audit report to the Commission, updating the Commission on his activity.
 - An update on issues relating to local government which is considered by the Commission's Financial Audit and Assurance Committee.
 - A weekly news coverage briefing provided to the Commission by Audit Scotland's Communication Team.

Commission business

Publications and activities

3. Audit Scotland collects media coverage on all reports published by the Accounts Commission. [Appendix 1](#) provides download and view statistics for the Commission's published reports and blogs over the last 12 months, as of 31 July 2022. [Appendix 2](#) provides additional information on the overall engagement that reports, and other business received on social media, as of 29 August 2022.
4. On 25 August the Accounts Commission [published](#) the Best Value Assurance Report (BVAR) on Shetland Islands Council and advising that leaders need to increase their pace and focus to deliver urgent change. The report raises concerns at the Council's ability to address its financial situation after finding the local authority was struggling to close a funding gap that could grow to between £61.2 million and £142.1 million within the next five years. The council was criticised for its short-term approach, dipping into its reserves to balance its budget, with the funds set to be exhausted by 2030/31. The report warns difficult decisions lie ahead and the council must engage with residents to work towards a financially sustainable position.
5. On 12 August a [video](#) by Commission member Andrew Burns about the August Commission meeting was published. This was the first time it was recorded with in-person support as part of new processes following relaxation of pandemic restrictions, and it received over 400 views which is the greatest number for 2022 meetings to date.
6. August has generally been a quieter period on social media, with just one publication and no significant public corporate activity such as the Commission member recruitment which had been promoting heavily over the previous two months. However, the [Local government in Scotland overview 2022](#) report (including the Improvement Service's [webinar](#) on it for elected members) were promoted throughout the month.

7. The statistics for the Shetland Islands Council BVAR were generally positive. Impressions (the number of people that see our content on social media) which were considerably down on the Angus Council BVAR, but this is to be expected as the content for the Angus report was very well engaged with by the council, perhaps due to the positive nature of that specific report. But Shetland impressions have already exceeded the one-month total for the Falkirk Council BVAR and are close to the Moray Council BVAR one month total. The engagement rate (the number of people actively interacting with the content on social media) is very strong, stronger than Angus and Moray BVARs. Shetland Islands Council [retweeted](#) our main post with a comment from the council leader and a link to their statement on the report.

Forthcoming publications and activities

8. During September the following activities are planned:
- Publication of:
 - The Commission's briefing on local government targets and plans relating to climate change (8 September)
 - A joint briefing with the Auditor General on child poverty (15 September)
 - A vlog by Sharon O'Connor reporting on the September Commission meeting (16 September).

Other Commission business

9. During August the Commission submitted the following joint responses with the Auditor General for Scotland to a number of consultations:
- A response to the Scottish Government's [consultation](#) on its first Data Strategy for health and social care. This can be found on the [members' SharePoint site](#).
 - A response to the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee's pre-budget scrutiny for 2023-24. This can be found on the [members' SharePoint site](#).
10. Members are asked to review the members' communications schedule on the [members' SharePoint site](#). This includes a list of planned publications and activities for the year, along with indicative roles for members in promotion and engagement activities. This document is live and is updated monthly, following discussion with Audit Scotland's communications team.

Auditor General

11. On 1 August the Auditor General published a [blog](#) about the work being done to ensure audit quality and innovation and to rebuild trust and confidence in the audit profession across all sectors following the recent challenging period.
12. During August the Auditor General responded to the Finance and Public Administration Committee's inquiry into the into how the rising cost of living will impact the Scottish Budget in 2023-24 and whether the Scottish Government's proposals for reforming the public service will deliver the efficiencies expected. This can be found on the members' SharePoint site.

Audit Scotland

13. On 18 August Audit Scotland [published](#) a report on the National Fraud Initiative in Scotland for 2022. This showed that overall, the level of identified public sector fraud and error in Scotland has fallen slightly. There is also an [interactive report](#) with exhibits related to the NFI outcomes and broken down by sector and participating body including [local government](#). The Commission will also be promoting messages directly to local government.
14. On 22 August, Audit Scotland [announced](#) that Vikki Bibby who officially started her post with Audit Scotland as Chief Operating Officer.
15. On 22 August Audit Scotland announced the appointment of Executive Director of Innovation and Quality, Kenny Oliver as Audit Scotland's Ethics partner to lead on developing Audit Scotland's ethics and compliance arrangements. A copy of the internal news item is available on the [members' SharePoint site](#).
16. On 25 August the first event in Audit Scotland 2022 – a series of events for Audit Scotland staff – took place. 'A conversation with the Auditor General' focused on public audit priorities and leading into the future.
17. During August the Audit Quality and Appointments team at Audit Scotland were [shortlisted](#) for the Public Finance Awards 2022 in the Excellence in Public Audit category. The Awards recognise the people, products and services that demonstrate excellence and originality within public finance across the UK and the winner will be announced at the end of November 2022.

Issues affecting Scottish local government

Scottish Government

18. On 1 August, the Deputy First Minister John Swinney, wrote a [letter](#) to the UK Chancellor Nadhim Zahawi following up on the joint letter from devolved administration finance ministers of 15 July and in light of the UK Government's announcements regarding public sector pay. In his letter, Mr Swinney requests the Chancellor to reconsider the funding available for public sector pay deals.
19. On 3 August the Scottish Government [published](#) details of a £500,000 contract to extend cyber resilience training to more than 250 public service and third sector health, housing, and social care bodies across Scotland. The grant will enable the Scottish Business Resilience Centre (SBRC) to run online and in-person workshops for public services and third sector health, housing, and social care bodies to ensure they are better prepared and protected.
20. On 8 August the Scottish Government's Director General for Communities, Paul Johnston wrote to public sector agencies and organisations requesting they urgently review their estate to identify any potential properties, premises or sites that could provide short-term accommodation for Ukrainian refugees arriving in Scotland. A copy of the letter is available on the [members' SharePoint site](#).
21. On 8 August the First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon [wrote](#) to the Prime Minister Boris Johnson seeking an emergency meeting of the Heads of Government Council to deal with the cost-of-living crisis. She stressed that while the Scottish Government is investing around £3bn this year in a range of measures, only the UK Government can make available resources on the scale required.
22. On 11 August the Scottish Government [published](#) details that the First Minister had chaired the Scottish Government Resilience Committee to discuss urgent steps to

mitigate the growing cost emergency which is affecting people and businesses. Ministers assessed the current situation and likely scenarios in the months ahead and agreed a number of immediate actions including an emergency budget review. The Resilience Committee will meet on a weekly basis for the foreseeable future.

23. On 16 August the Scottish Government [published](#) details that the First Minister will convene an urgent summit with energy suppliers and consumer groups later in August to consider what collective action can be taken by government, energy companies and the third sector to help businesses and consumers struggling with rising energy bills.
24. During August the Scottish Government [published](#) details of the vacancy of the Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life in Scotland. The appointment is for six years and closing date for applications is Monday 22 August.

Local government general

25. On the 19 August, the Scottish Government [published](#) statutory guidance for public sector bodies to the Fairer Scotland Duty to help them consider how they can reduce inequalities of outcome caused by socio-economic disadvantage, when making strategic decisions.

Health, Social Care and Covid Response

26. On 9 August the Scottish Government [published](#) its update to the National Drugs Mission Plan for 2022-26 outlining the focus to reduce drug deaths and improve the lives of those impacted by drugs.
27. On 14 August the Scottish Government [published](#) details of the winter vaccination programme, with people aged 65 and over and frontline health and social care staff first in line for a winter booster jab for Covid-19 alongside a flu vaccine where eligible. Letters with appointment times for those aged over 65 years will be sent out and from 22 August an online portal will be available for health and social care workers to book their appointments.
28. On 26 August the Scottish Government [published](#) advice for people who were on the Highest Risk List to help them make informed decisions and access support services. The advice includes information for immunosuppressed or immunocompromised people and how to stay safe at work as well as NHS information about vaccinations and details on the Scottish Government's Winter 2022 Vaccination Programme and advice to support people to get re-involved and return to things they used to do before the pandemic

Social Security

29. On 4 August the Scottish Government [published](#) details of its consultation on proposed changes to the social security system which have been identified following the passage of the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018. Proposals are grouped into the following four sections: improving client experience, delivering value for money, independent advice and scrutiny of Social Security and Coronavirus (Covid-19) measures. I have been advised by Audit Scotland colleagues that the Auditor General does not intend to respond to the consultation, given the consultation's focus is on policy choices and does not cover any aspects of social security administered by local authorities. I therefore propose that the Commission does not respond.
30. On 29 August the Scottish Government [published](#) details that the Adult Disability Payment opens for applications nationwide for new applications across Scotland following successful pilots in 13 local authority areas.

Climate Change / Energy Efficiency

31. In July the Scottish Government [published](#) a report on the social evaluation of the Energy Efficient Scotland Transition Programme. The programme aims to support local authorities' engagement with those expected to self-fund energy efficiency improvements. The report presents findings from a survey which asked 490 households across eight local authority areas about their experiences. It presents the following 5 key lessons on the operation of the scheme:
- local authorities are in a position to provide energy efficiency advice. Appropriate resources, in terms of funding, skills, and staff capacity, are needed to support local authorities in this work.
 - The highest proportion of respondents taking or planning action were those engaged either via a drop-in centre or project website.
 - Cost was the primary barrier that prevented household respondents taking energy efficiency measures. Most respondents stated that they would need a grant to support their uptake of efficiency measures.
 - Lack of new information was a barrier to household change. Whilst the provision of information through the Transition Programme was beneficial, most householders believed they were already familiar with standard information.
 - Findings highlighted the difficulties of engaging the non-domestic sector in energy efficiency improvements, suggesting the potential value of an obligatory framework to secure participation.
32. On 17 August the Scottish Government [published](#) details about First Minister Nicola Sturgeon and Zero Carbon Buildings Minister Patrick Harvie's announcement of £16.2 million funding for five zero emission heat networks during a visit to ng Homes in Glasgow. Projects to receive funding include heat network projects in Aberdeen City and the City of Edinburgh Councils.
33. On 25 August the Scottish Government [published](#) details of £1.2m in funding to be awarded to key energy advice organisations to ensure energy customers can access support and advice to deal with rising energy bills and heating costs. The funding will be distributed to help key agencies, including Advice Direct Scotland, Home Energy Scotland and Citizen's Advice Scotland, reach more people and support a training programme for staff from third sector organisations to expand the reach of expert advice.

Communities

34. On 17 August the Scottish Government [published](#) changes to the shared equity housing scheme that will mean disabled people, first-time buyers and others on low to medium incomes will have an increased opportunity to buy a home that meets their needs.
35. On 19 August the Scottish Government [published](#) details of a further £36 million expansion of the Reaching 100% (R100) contracts. The extension of existing contracts with Openreach will see a further 2,637 rural properties access gigabit-capable connections through additional Scottish and UK Government investment in the R100 programme.
36. On 19 August the Scottish Government [published](#) details that following public consultation, the proposed Islands Bond will not go ahead as planned. Consultation

respondents were fairly evenly split between those in favour and those opposed to the Bond, however Island respondents raised concerns about the proposed approach and whether it would achieve the objective of reversing population decline.

Economy and business

37. On 19 August the Scottish Government published its labour market monthly briefing for [August](#). This summarises employment and economic inactivity from the Labour Force Survey and other labour market statistics from a range of official sources. Some of the information is broken down into Scottish local authority areas. SPICe also published an overview of the labour market for Scotland in [August](#).
38. On 24 August the Scottish Government [published](#) details of the Flexible Workforce Development Fund which provides workers in organisations of all sizes with access to training courses through local colleges, the Open University in Scotland and Skills Development Scotland. The fund is open to organisations who pay the UK Apprenticeship Levy and small-to-medium size business (SMEs) and plays a crucial role in Scotland's National Strategy for Economic Transformation.

Scottish Parliament

39. During August, the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe) published:
 - An extended [blog](#) on the National Care Service Bill
 - A [blog](#) on ethical commissioning
 - A [blog](#) on Scotland's performance
 - A [blog](#) on rural health and social care.
40. On 8 August the Scottish Parliament [published](#) plans to create a 24-person Citizens' Panel to give members of the public a direct opportunity to influence change across Scotland. The panel will be selected at random and broadly reflect the population demographic of Scotland. It will report to the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee.
41. On 10 August the [Coronavirus \(Recovery and Reform\) \(Scotland\) Bill](#) received Royal Assent and became an Act. The Act creates new powers for Ministers to respond to public health emergencies; makes changes to a number of services in terms of electronic provision, such as holding virtual meetings and signing documents electronically; provisions on eviction from properties in the private rented sector; and changes to the justice system brought in during the pandemic.
42. As the Scottish Parliament was in recess over the summer period from 2 July until 4 September, there were no meetings in the Chamber or committee meetings held.

Parliamentary committee news

Public Audit Committee

43. On 12 August the Permanent Secretary, John-Paul Marks [wrote](#) to the convener following the session on the Auditor General of Scotland's audit reports [Scotland's financial response to Covid-19](#), [Scotland's economy: supporting business through the Covid-19 pandemic](#) and [Social security: Progress on implementing the devolved benefits](#). The Permanent Secretary provides additional information in response to questions posed by the Committee relating to an evaluation of Covid-19 spending, the publication of financial reporting information and progress on implementing devolved

Social Security benefits.

Health, Social Care and Sport Committee

44. On 9 August the Minister for Drugs Policy, Angela Constance [wrote](#) to the committee to highlight the publication of the 2022-26 National Mission on [Drug Deaths Plan for 2022-2026](#) and which is also covered in paragraph 25 above.

Education, Children and Young People Committee

45. On 2 August the Committee [published](#) a report into the Scottish Government's policy commitment to close the poverty-related attainment gap, setting out its concerns and recommendations. The Committee recommends that Education Scotland takes ownership for closing the poverty-related attainment gap.
46. On 9 August Fiona Robertson, the SQA Chief Executive, [wrote](#) to the Education, Children and Young People Committee about the 2022 exam results. The letter highlights this year's set of results as being one of the strongest to date in an exam year, particularly given the ongoing disruption due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It also provides details on attainment levels at National 5, Higher and Advance Higher qualifications, sets out the support for learners that is available and how results were determined.

Local government news

Local government pay dispute

47. Throughout August there have been a number of communications and articles on public sector pay disputes and responses from the Scottish Government, COSLA and unions. During the week of 22 August, refuse workers in at least 20 Scottish local authorities went on strike.
48. On 12 August COSLA [published](#) a statement on pay negotiations. This followed confirmation that an additional £140 million would be provided by the Scottish Government to help settle pay disputes. The Deputy First Minister, John Swinney, [stated](#) that there would be financial sacrifices as a consequence. He also said a further £200m would be offered over two years to provide a cost-of-living payment to workers earning below £39,000. Since then unions have rejected [an offer from COSLA](#), which would give a 5% pay rise to all staff, and an additional cost-of-living payment for those on the lowest incomes. More strikes are planned for the first week in September. Unions say the cost-of-living payment will not be consolidated into workers' future wages and will therefore leave them worse off.
49. On 30 August on [twitter](#), the First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, noted the Scottish budget was finite, saying her government would go further if it could.
50. All four COSLA news releases on the pay dispute can be found on their [website](#). COSLA stated on 29 August that they were disappointed with the local government trade unions' reaction to one of the best pay deals for their workforce in decades.
51. On 30 August the GMB Union [responded](#) to the latest pay offer stating "Our members need a flat rate offer because that means more consolidated money goes into the pockets of frontline workers delivering the services our communities depend on. Unions have been clear about this from the submission of our initial pay claim and right through negotiations over the weekend - the prospect of a Heads of Service getting four times more money than a bin collector, school cleaner or home carer is simply not credible."

52. During August UNISON [published](#) research showing the impact of the cost of living crisis on low paid workers in the public sector.
53. The current round of strikes is due to end on 31 August in many local authority areas and ended on 30 August in Edinburgh. However, another wave of strikes is expected from 6 to 8 September, this time including nursery and school staff as announced on [23 August](#) by Unison.

Other local government news

54. On 1 August the City of Edinburgh Council [published](#) details that the Scottish Government had approved the Council's proposals to change planning requirements relating to short-term lets. This means that within the short term let control area, the change of use of an entire dwelling that is not someone's principal home, to a short-term let will require planning permission. The new short term let control area will be brought into force in September 2022 once the necessary legal notice has been given.
55. On 3 August the Press and Journal [published](#) an article about Moray Council Convener Marc Macrae quitting his position ahead of a vote of no confidence at a Moray Council meeting the following week. The councillor has also asked police to investigate claims he is being harassed.
56. On 2 August the Leader of West Dunbartonshire Council, Martin Rooney, [wrote](#) to Deputy First Minister, John Swinney appealing to the Scottish Government to provide greater financial support for local government as the authority faces an estimated £14 million budget gap.
57. On 8 August Holyrood [published](#) an article about Edinburgh City Council bidding for more than £12 million in shared prosperity funding from the UK Government as it targets support for a series of projects that will tackle poverty and support local businesses in the city.
58. On 11 August the STV news [published](#) an article about Highland Council having no capital budget for play parks that it is required to maintain and that there is a backlog of repairs estimated at £3.5 million for 2022/23.
59. On 11 August North Lanarkshire Council [published](#) details of the new Council leader and depute leader following a vote at the Council meeting after the resignation of the previous leader, SNP councillor Jordan Linden in July. New leader, Labour councillor Jim Logue, was previously the leader of the Council between 2016 and May 2022.
60. On 11 August STV news [published](#) an article that with only a week before the new academic year starts, nearly half of councils in Scotland had still to decide on the hourly rates for childcare providers.
61. On 15 August Public Finance [published](#) an article about a 50 per cent increase in the number of incidents reported to Glasgow City Council's whistleblowing service, which aims to detect and prevent fraud. However, although there was an increase in the previous year the numbers remain below levels reported before the onset of Covid-19.
62. On 17 August Public Finance [published](#) an article that West Lothian Leisure, which runs sports, swimming and fitness centres in the West Lothian area, will receive the guarantee of financial backing from the Council after the Council Executive Committee agreed to provide a 'letter of comfort' to the arms-length body. The trust's external auditors asked for a letter of comfort from the council setting out that the authority "will undertake cash flow management with WLL to allow [it] to remain in credit at all times, thus allowing [it] to proceed as a going concern and meets [its] everyday cash liabilities" throughout 2022-23.

63. On 18 August Moray Council [published](#) details of the resignation of Scottish Liberal Democrat councillor, Cllr Christopher Price, who was elected at this year's local government elections, with the resignation triggering a by-election.
64. On 18 August COSLA [published](#) its support for the Period Products Act which came into law in Scotland, acknowledging that period products are a basic necessity and that councils have supported the legislation and have been working to provide millions of free products to those who need them.
65. On 21 August North Lanarkshire Council [published](#) details of a council decision to temporarily suspend their blue paper and card bins service for three weeks and to provide Strathclyde Partnership for Transport (SPT) with bus drivers for school transport in order to meet the Council's legal duty to transport children who are eligible to school.
66. On 23 August STV news [published](#) an article about Dundee City Council's Neighbourhood Services Committee agreeing to buy more homes on the open market to try and provide additional social housing. Funding of up to £40,000 will be available for each purchase and a best-value assessment will be undertaken each property including repair, improvement and legal costs.
67. On 24 August the Inverness Courier [published](#) an article that Highland Council has said the R100 North contract cannot deliver its £20 million broadband and digital plan. The Council had hoped the R100 North contract would deliver investment to complement and expand the rollout of superfast broadband, however a report to the Council's Economy and Infrastructure committee on 25 August, regarding the City Region deal says 'this route is now not an option' and that the project is at 'severe risk'.
68. On 25 August the Herald [published](#) an article advising that Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) exam appeals could be severely delayed after staff voted to strike. The Unite union said 86.7 per cent of its SQA members had backed the action in response to a 'derisory' pay offer. It is estimated the move will disrupt up to 22,000 appeals.
69. On 25 August the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), [published](#) details that following the meeting of the Salaries Committee, it is intending to seek authorisation from the National Executive to open a consultative ballot of its members on the latest inadequate pay offer from local authority employers. The EIS Salaries Committee, recommended members vote to reject the current 5% offer.
70. On 26 August the BBC news [published](#) an article about Scottish Borders Council having agreed to reopen community hubs to provide food and warmth to people and families struggling with the cost-of-living crisis. The move is part of the council's anti-poverty strategy.

Improvement Service

71. During August the Improvement Service published details about the following:
 - A new guidance document [#FollowMe2](#) giving advice and guidance on using social media for elected members. This was developed jointly with the National Communications Advisory Group (Scotland) and updates the 2015 guidance as the social media landscape has matured and become more complex.
 - Their [involvement](#) in supporting a new Public Health Scotland initiative [Rapid Action Drug Alerts and Response \(RADAR\)](#) that uses innovative data collection and validation to help assist with the rapid and targeted deployment of interventions to help prevent and reduce the risk of drug-related harm.

- Details of engagement [events](#) during August, on potential models that could be used to distribute the devolved debt levy funding, following initial research and seeking to explore the models and use feedback from the events in the final evaluation report.

SOLACE

72. During August SOLACE [published](#) details about its Scotland Conference on 15-16 September. The conference will focus on three themes, Education reform, finance and the National Care Service. The Improvement Service also published details that the Chief Executive and Head of Transformation, Performance and Improvement, will be leading a [breakout session](#) on “Delivering a future for Scottish local authorities: The challenges they face, the questions that need asking, and a model for the future”. The session will focus on six themes - unlocking community action; leading council and cross-sector partnerships; enabling a functioning, trusted local and central government relationship; designing for people’s needs; creating digital, design and technology enabled transformation; and tackling inequality.

Other scrutiny bodies

Standards Commission

73. On 9 August the Standards Commission [published](#) an article on the importance of objectivity as one of the key principles of public life. The article sets out the importance of councillors being objective and also being seen to be objective in their decision-making as set out in the Councillors’ Code of Conduct and Model Code of Conduct for Members of Devolved Public Bodies in Scotland.

Scottish Public Sector Ombudsman (SPSO)

74. During August, the SPSO [published](#) their August newsletter, outlining statistics on complaints and outlining the findings and learning points from two decision reports relating to Highland NHS Board. It also includes statistics on Scottish Welfare Fund reviews, case studies and the first investigation report published by the Independent National Whistleblowing officer (INWO) (see paragraph below) and the INWO [August e-bulletin](#).
75. On 24 August the SPSO [published](#) Independent National Whistleblowing Officer Rosemary Agnew’s first whistleblowing investigation report that had been laid before the Scottish Parliament. The report concerned a complaint about NHS National Services Scotland’s national contact centre.

Care Inspectorate

76. On 16 August the Care Inspectorate [published](#) a joint inspection report of services for children and young people in the East Renfrewshire community planning partnership area. The joint inspection report with Education Scotland, Healthcare Improvement Scotland and Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland found consistent clear strengths in ensuring children and young people at risk of harm were safe, protected and supported, with no significant areas for improvement identified.
77. On 23 August the Care Inspectorate [published](#) a joint inspection report of services for adult support and protection in Perth and Kinross area. The joint inspection report with Healthcare Improvement Scotland and Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland found has found clear strengths which collectively outweighed the areas for improvement. The partnership had strong self-evaluation and quality assurance processes and provided opportunities for the collaborative involvement of partner agencies and information sharing and that strategic leadership and oversight of adult

support and protection arrangements were very effective. Some priority areas for improvement were also identified including that medical examinations were not always carried out when they should be, that some aspects of adult protection practice were inconsistent and adults at risk of harm and unpaid carers should be invited and supported to attend case conferences. The partnership has been asked to prepare an improvement plan to address these areas for improvement.

Scottish Housing Regulator

78. On 26 August the Scottish Housing Regulator [published](#) a report considering findings from their 2021/22 programme of National Panel engagement which brings together feedback from the National Panel of Tenants and Service users. The 2021/22 programme focussed on the following four themes within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic:

- Their current financial circumstances, how these have been affected by the pandemic, and views whether their rent represents good value for money;
- Their experience of heating their home;
- Experience of accessing landlord services digitally, and their interest in making more use of digital contact options to get in touch with their landlord; and
- How they felt the pandemic has affected their landlord's services during 2021.

Within the key points noted under each theme, given the current increasing cost of living it is worth noting that at the time of the survey, more than half of respondents (58%) had experienced difficulty heating their home and most (61%) respondents felt their financial circumstances were worse than prior to the pandemic with 25% saying they were not managing well financially and 71% were concerned about the future affordability of their rent and any increases.

Scottish public policy news

79. On 2 August the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) [published](#) details of support that will be available including its helpline from Tuesday 9 August when young people across Scotland will receive their exam results. The SQA have also said that exams this year have been graded 'generously' following two years of disruption due to Covid.
80. On 3 August the STV news [published](#) an article about a new report highlighting that the most disadvantaged Scots have the highest rates of premature mortality from avoidable causes of death. The [report](#) used data from Glasgow of more than half a million people and showed that homelessness, opioid addiction, involvement in the criminal justice system and psychosis were all independently, and jointly linked to early and avoidable deaths.
81. On 4 August the Institute for Public Policy Research Scotland [published](#) the first in a series of reports on short-term recommendations to the Scottish Government on delivering a minimum income guarantee, universal basic services and fair work. The proposals present a way to reshape the welfare state in Scotland and could provide both short-term relief to families during the cost-of-living crisis and also a long-term shift in the delivery of social security and public services.
82. On 8 August the Scotsman [published](#) an article about Scottish Association for Mental Health, NHS Grampian and Police Scotland working together in the north-east of Scotland on mental health concerns as they launched a new joint guide designed to help anyone worries someone is suicidal.

83. On 8 August the Fraser of Allander Institute [published](#) an article about the Scottish economy highlighting a number of challenges for business including supply chain disruption, rising prices, difficulties in hiring staff, increases in interest rates and a lack of confidence this year. The article outlines areas of uncertainty but advises there is increasing evidence that we are leaving a health crisis and entering a crisis of living standards.
84. On 9 August the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service [published](#) figures which show the proportion of Scottish students gaining a place at their first-choice university was above the pre-pandemic level in 2019. Figures also showed an increase in the participating of young students from the most disadvantaged areas and a closing of the gender progression gap for young people in Scotland.
85. On 11 August the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) [published](#) an observation paper on the National Care Service (Scotland) Bill with analysis showing it could exacerbate rather than reduce differences in service quality across Scotland. Current plans would also mean significant changes for Scottish councils' funding arrangements with new 'Care Boards' requiring the transfer of around a third of councils' budgets.
86. On 12 August Holyrood [published](#) an article about the cost-of-living crisis putting charities 'critical' to Scottish communities putting services at risk as one in six charities struggle with increased charges for materials and supplies and increases in energy and transport costs.
87. On 15 August the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland published a [statement](#) calling on the Scottish Government to move faster to roll out universal free school meals. The Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland and Barnardo's were two of the 120 signatories of an [open letter](#) urging the Scottish Government to double child bridging payments to mitigate the impact of increases in the cost of living.
88. On 18 August the STV news [published](#) an article that identifies more than 72 percent of households in Scotland are expected to be in fuel poverty in January next year, according to a new study by the University of York. The study estimates two-thirds of all UK households will be in fuel poverty at the start of 2023, with Scotland having the second highest percentage of households, second to Northern Ireland and contrasting with only 56 percent in London.
89. During August the Citizens Advice Scotland (CAS) [published](#) a quarterly cost-of-living analysis which advised there had been a growth in demand for cost of living related advice such as utilities and food insecurity. The analysis also highlighted that in more than one in ten utilities cases, clients also required advice around food insecurity.

Other UK audit bodies

90. On 10 August Audit Wales published an [evidence report](#) about the Welsh public sector's readiness for Net Zero Carbon by 2030, following their initial [key findings report](#) in July 2022, and which provides more detailed information and data from the work as well as local examples of actions being taken by public bodies. The report acknowledges the positive actions being taken but advises that the pace of change needs to accelerate.
91. On 16 August Audit Wales [published](#) a report that found serious failings in financial management and governance at Maesteg Town Council. The report found this prolonged poor governance and financial management created an environment that could be exploited to defraud and highlighted a number of other significant failings including the failure to establish an adequate internal audit system prior to 2019 and failing to comply with statutory timescales for submitting accounts. The report outlines

several recommendations.

UK Government

92. On 15 August the UK Government [published](#) plans to encourage social tariffs to cut broadband bills for millions of low-income households.

UK public policy news

93. On 3 August CityAM [published](#) an article about Sir Jon Thompson, Chief Executive of the Financial Reporting Council in an interview saying the solution to auditors' problems with fines is entirely in their own hands and that they should start improving the quality of their work. The chief executive added the watchdog will continue to prioritise audit quality over boosting competition in the sector.
94. On 4 August the Office for National Statistics [published](#) a report on the prevalence of ongoing symptoms following Covid-19 in the UK. It finds an estimated 1.8 million people living in private households were experiencing self-reported long Covid-19 symptoms, with 72% reporting symptoms adversely affecting their day-to-day activities.
95. On 5 August the BBC News [published](#) an article about the Bank of England's most recent [quarterly monetary policy summary](#) that warns the UK will fall into recession as it raised interest rates by the most in 27 years. The Fraser of Allander Institute published an [article](#) about the Bank of England's announcement to revise up its expectations for inflation, outlining the immediate impact of further reducing real household incomes with the greatest impact being felt on low-income households.
96. On 15 August the Institute for Fiscal Studies [published](#) a report the UK Government's one-off energy bills support package. It warns continuing to provide support on this scale requires a "substantial fiscal loosening" which would put upward pressure on the inflation which created the demand for support measures. However, it notes making no changes will leave both rich and poor households facing significant declines in real incomes as energy prices rise.
97. On 15 August Resolution Foundation [published](#) a report on why low-income households will have to cut back on spending by three times as much as high-income households this winter to afford their energy bills.
98. On 19 August the NHS Confederation [published](#) an article warning of an impending public health emergency due to rising energy costs and cost of living pressures. In a [letter](#) to the Chancellor, Nadhim Zahawi, NHS leaders across England, Wales and Northern Ireland have said people's health will deteriorate if they are unable to heat their homes and afford nutritious food, noting fuel poverty is already associated with around 10,000 deaths each year, without urgent government action.
99. On 23 August the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) [published](#) confirmation that around six million disabled people across the UK will receive their one-off £150 disability cost-of-living payment from Tuesday 20 September. The majority of those eligible are expected to have received their payment by the beginning of October.
100. On 23 August the BBC news [published](#) information from EDF Energy UK that half of UK households are facing fuel poverty this winter unless the government does more to help with energy bills. EDF have seen a 30 per cent rise in calls from customers under stress and struggling to pay their bills already and which are predicted to be nearly three times higher than last winter.
101. On 23 August the Institute for Government [published](#) a report which lays out the government's options in addressing rising energy bills. Some of the key findings of the

report confirm the government's previous support package was generous but will not be impactful as energy bills rise further, capping energy bills would avoid gaps in support, but be expensive and that support will need to be extended beyond 2022/23.

102. On 25 August the Resolution Foundation [published](#) a briefing note containing policy options to deal with the rise in energy prices and made the following key points:

- Energy prices increasing just as demand for gas increases means a typical household bill will be £2,000 higher this year (2022-23) compared to last year.
- Monthly energy costs are set to peak at £613 in January; this will be unaffordable for many but presents the biggest risks to pre-payment meter customers.
- It is vital any new policy intervention accounts for household incomes and energy need, but as yet no proposals from Government or opposition parties meet this challenge.
- A social tariff, whereby qualifying households are offered a discounted rate on energy bills could be the ideal solution, with a 30 per cent discount for low-to-middle income households offsetting the increase in energy costs since Ofgem's prediction of a £2,800 annual price cap in May.
- If there is no time to implement this, a similar result could be delivered through a lowering energy price for all, and recouping some of the cost by adding an additional 1pence to all rates of income tax.

103. On 26 August Ofgem [published](#) information that the energy price cap will increase to £3,549 per year for dual fuel for an average household from 1 October for England, Scotland and Wales. The rise will apply to almost 20 million households on standard variable tariffs, with an annual bill increasing by 80%. While the new price cap level will not take effect until October, Ofgem has warned it's possible some suppliers may begin increasing direct debits before then to spread costs. It added that although price cap projections for January are not being published due to the volatile market, the market for gas in winter means prices could get significantly worse through 2023.

Conclusion

104. The Commission is invited to:

- a) Agree not to respond to the consultation highlighted in paragraph 29.
- b) Note this report and consider any implications for its work programme.

Paul Reilly
Secretary to the Commission
30 August 2022

Appendix 1 Commission reports/blogs in past 12 months: Downloads and views

Report / blog	Date	Downloads/ blog views
Best Value Assurance Report: Angus Council	5 July 22	359
Integration Joint Boards: Financial analysis 2020/21	30 June 22	513 (+374)
Accounts Commission annual report 2021/22	29 June 22	189 (+85)
Blog: Inequalities in Scotland	23 June 22	420 (+147)
Scotland's financial response to Covid-19	16 June 22	1026 (+237)
Blog: Local Government in Scotland 2022	1 June 22	431 (+93)
Local government in Scotland Overview 2022	25 May 22	1,588 (+283)
Blog: Children and young people who need additional support for learning	17 May 22	657 (+106)
Blog: Working together to increase collaboration and accelerate improvement	16 May 22	176 (*)
The 2020/21 audit of Orkney and Shetland Valuation Joint Board	22 Mar 22	398 (*)
Blog: Councils face complex and urgent challenges	21 Mar 22	540 (+39)
Scotland's economy: Supporting businesses through the Covid-19 pandemic	17 Mar 22	983 (+44)
Local government in Scotland: financial overview 2020/21	10 Mar 22	1,424 (+96)
Drug and alcohol services update	8 Mar 22	1,497 (+170)
Best Value Assurance Report progress report: Moray Council	3 Mar 22	516 (+38)
Blog: The value of independence & scrutiny across local gov't	24 Feb 22	431 (+34)
Social care briefing	27 Jan 22	3,656 (+207)
Best Value Assurance Report: Falkirk Council	13 Jan 22	1,195 (+56)
Blog: Public performance reporting – why it matters	21 Dec 21	359 (*)
Blog: Assurance & scrutiny on Scotland's housing benefit services	25 Nov 21	280 (*)
Community empowerment: Covid-19 update	28 Oct 21	2,786 (+32)
Best Value Assurance Report: South Ayrshire Council	27 Oct 21	884 (+45)
Auditing climate change: An update	21 Oct 21	1,240 (+60)
The role of sponsors in our reporting work	14 Oct 21	233 (*)
The impact of Covid-19 on Scottish Councils' benefit services	7 Oct 21	467 (*)
Blog: Christie – it really is now or never	4 Oct 21	800 (*)
Best Value Assurance Report: East Dunbartonshire Council	29 Sept 21	744 (+42)

Accounts Commission Strategy 2021-26	23 Sept 21	1,257 (+48)
Blog: Digital exclusion	16 Sept 21	1,379 (+45)

Note: Figures are reported as at the end July 2022.

Key:

(x) Increase in numbers since last month

* This figure is below 30

n/a Not applicable

Appendix 2: Accounts Commission social media engagement data

	Followers	Posting views	Video views	Links accessed	Retweets	Likes	Replies	No. of publications
Aug 22	891 (+1)	6,800	794	71	25	15	4	1
July 22	890 (+7)	18,200	740	124	42	53	2	2
June 22	883 (+30)	20,600	679	245	90	47	10	4
May 22	853 (+12)	17,200	843	140	78	65	8	3
Apr 22	841 (+10)	2,009	0	16	3	2	0	0
Mar 22	831 (+23)	33,100	2,800	118	77	61	12	5
Feb 22	807 (+2)	8,000	1,100	60	34	32	1	1
Jan 22	805 (+13)	12,600	839	103	27	38	6	2
Dec 21	792 (+4)	6,500	108	48	20	25	2	0
Nov 21	788 (+10)	6,600	499	32	29	35	0	1
Oct 21	778 (+13)	22,500	316	93	47	97	6	6
Sep 21	765 (+8)	13,600	584	43	35	39	0	3

Figures as of 29 Aug 2022.

Change on previous month shown in brackets.